

Northolt Park Baptist Church (24 December 2006)

5 Minutes on Irenaeus

We've been looking back at our Christian family tree, going right back to the immediate period after the apostles with the Apostolic Fathers (Clement and Ignatius and Polycarp and others), and Justin Martyr. Today we're going to learn a few things about Irenaeus.

He was born about AD 130 and had been a pupil of Polycarp. (You might remember that Polycarp himself as a young man had been in contact with the apostle John, so Irenaeus could trace a link between himself and the apostles.) He became the bishop of Lyons (in Gaul then, and France today); he was influential in the early church, and his works were translated and widely used.

Last time, you may recall, we described Justin as an *apologist*, someone who defended the Christian faith. Irenaeus might be described as a *polemicist* – meaning someone involved in a dispute. Whereas the apologists were concerned *defending* Christianity, the polemicists were concerned with *attacking* heretical ideas.

So, what kind of ideas did Irenaeus attack? They can be gathered under one word – *gnosticism*.

Gnosticism

Gnosticism comes from the Greek word for 'knowledge'. And 'gnosticism' is a term for a set of religious ideas in the early church which saw people in need of salvation, but thought that salvation would come through secret *knowledge*.

Gnostics believed that God was a spirit, and was so far *above and beyond* that he couldn't have any contact with creation. Because matter was evil and spirit good, Jesus wasn't really a human being; he only *seemed* to be human, and he didn't really suffer or die on the cross. Men and women were saved when the good spirit, the 'divine spark', which was trapped inside the evil body, was released through knowledge passed on in special ceremonies. Salvation was deliverance from ignorance, not redemption from sin.

That's what Irenaeus was up against. He argued against the various gnostic systems in one of his writings which we know by its shortened title, *Against Heresies*.

Against Heresies

We'll focus on three of the planks in his argument:

- The apostolicity of the Christian faith

Against the gnostics he argued that the church had the authoritative version of the gospel, showing how its teaching could be traced back to the apostles themselves, and that it had been declared openly and not in secret.

- The unity of the one eternal God

God is active in the world, he explains, by the Son and his Spirit, seen as the two 'hands' of God who is also creator of the world. God is not so far above and beyond that he is not able to deal with the world.

- The reality of the incarnation of Christ

He affirmed that Christ was God and man, truly human. He pointed to the New Testament writings in support of this. He was particularly interested in Paul's teaching on Christ as the *second Adam*. The first Adam, as representative of the human race, was created good, but fell, and all humans are implicated in his fall and share his guilt. The only hope of being saved lies in men and women being given a *new head* who will reverse the process. So, Christ becomes a second Adam, whose obedience cancels out Adam's disobedience, so that humans can make a new start by being incorporated into Christ, not Adam. As Irenaeus says at one point: 'Because of his measureless love, he became what we are in order to enable us to become what he is.'

Justin reminded us of the importance of giving an account to those who ask for the hope within us; Irenaeus reminds us of the importance of exposing false teaching, taking every thought captive for Christ.